

Testimony of Lina Nealon  
Director of Strategic Initiatives, National Center on Sexual Exploitation  
before the  
Maine Joint Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety  
**Importance of Demand Reduction as Primary Prevention:  
the Only Way to Reduce Sex Trafficking Markets**  
May 12, 2021

Dear Members of the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide background and context showing L.D. 1592 to be a very strategic, innovative approach to the goal of shrinking sex trafficking and prostitution markets, both of which cause *profound*, often *lifelong harm* for its victims.

My name is Lina Nealon and I'm the Director of Corporate and Strategic Initiatives at the National Center on Sexual Exploitation in Washington, DC. Our mission is to oppose all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, and to promote human dignity.

For eight years, 2008-2016, I served as founding director of Demand Abolition, a Boston-based national program dedicated to combating the demand for commercial sexual exploitation. Our most innovative work involved a collaboration between 12 major cities, including Boston, to flip the paradigm widely used by law enforcement: Rather than arresting those selling sex as the main approach to limiting prostitution, jurisdictions we worked with focused on sex buyers as the *drivers* of the entire commercial sex industry.

The insights motivating this new approach —being implemented in cities ranging from Seattle to Houston to Boston— that are embedded in LD 1592 are the following:

#1: Prostitution is not a business like any other. It is exploitation – as this bill so rightly defines it. Multiple research studies and survivor testimony leave no question that prostitution is an inherently harmful, illicit industry preying on the most marginalized in society.

#2 Prostitution and sex trafficking are inextricably linked. All victims of sex trafficking are trafficked into prostitution markets. By federal definition, severe forms of sex trafficking involve the use of force, fraud, and COERCION (which may, for example, involve drugs, disabilities, or homelessness).

#3 Sex buyers drive the commercial sex market. Simply put, if there were no buyers, there would be no business. Yet sex buyers have remained largely unaccountable, while those they purchase have too often suffered multiple traumas, including arrest and incarceration for a crime perpetrated *against* them.

Robust evidence is spurring a rapidly increasing recognition across the US and globally that *the most effective* way to combat sexual exploitation is to tackle demand, the root cause.

We know from interviewing sex buyers and monitoring online sex buyer chat boards that buyers purchase **people because they are confident they will get away with it**. In a study by Demand Abolition surveying 8,000 adult US males, the majority reported that they would stop doing it if the **legal and social consequences** were more punitive. The punishments they especially fear are being arrested and having their crime found out by families and employers.

LD 1592 addresses several areas buyers themselves said would alter their behavior:

- It sends a powerful message to buyers – and society at large – that purchasing another human being is not acceptable in the state of Maine.
- It enacts *principled penalties*: making the consequences fit the gravity of the crime
- It makes clear that consent cannot be coerced by cash or credit card.
- Some of the proven methods of reducing demand can be pursued without any burden on taxpayers
- Equally important, it provides options for people who are exploited in prostitution and want to get out

Maine had the opportunity to be a leader in the nation in holding sex buyers accountable, while providing the necessary services victims desperately need to rebuild their lives.

Thank you for your attention.